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# Constructing the Charisma of *Khruba* (Venerable Monks) in Contemporary Thai Society

Pisith Nasee\*

*Khruba* (venerable monks) have consistently played a meaningful role in local Buddhist communities of Northern Thai culture for generations. While today's *khruba* continue to represent themselves as followers of Khruba Siwichai and Lan Na Buddhism, in fact over the past three decades they have flourished by adopting heterogeneous beliefs and practices in the context of declining influence of the *sangha* and popular Buddhism. In order to respond to social and cultural transformations and to fit in with different expectations of people, modern *khruba* construct charisma through different practices besides the obvious strictness in *dhamma* used to explain the source of *khruba*'s charisma in Lan Na Buddhist history. The ability to integrate local Buddhist traditions with the spirit of capitalism-consumerism and gain a large number of followers demonstrates that *khruba* is still a meaningful concept that plays a crucial role in modern Buddhist society, particularly in Thailand. By employing concepts of charisma, production of translocalities, and popular Buddhism and prosperity religion, it can be argued that *khruba* is steeped in local knowledge, yet the concept has never been linear and static. Modern *khruba* can be interpreted and consumed in many ways by diverse groups of people. This is also considered a key success of modern *khruba* and their proliferation during the past three decades in Thailand. Data were collected in 2015–16 through in-depth interviews and participatory observation as part of the author's PhD dissertation at Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

**Keywords:** *khruba*, constructing charisma, production of translocalities, popular Buddhism and prosperity religion, Lan Na Buddhism

## Introduction

*Khruba* (venerable monks) have played a meaningful role in local Buddhist communities of northern Thai culture for generations. The proliferation of *khruba* during the past three decades does not only reflect the dynamics of Buddhist society within the northern

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region, it also has significant implications at the national and global levels. Nonetheless, if we assume that it is a continuation of pre-modern practice, then the rise of *khrua* signifies the production of translocalities stemming from the practices of local subjects in a specific context (Appadurai 1996). It is noteworthy that the concept of *khrua* is not fixed. On the contrary, it has been revised, reevaluated, and reinterpreted in the context of the declining influence of Thai Buddhist *sangha*, the growth of a capitalist economy, the proliferation of mass media, the rise of the middle class, and the growth of prosperity religion in Thailand and throughout Asia (see Apinya 1993; 1998; Jackson 1999a; 1999b; Pattana 2008; 2012; Stengs 2009; McDaniel 2011).

In 2002 Kwanchewan Buadaeng categorized *khrua* into two groups: (1) senior monks who had remained in monkhood for a long time and were seen as meritorious, with knowledge and practices in the traditional northern Thai style; and (2) those related to Khruba Siwichai,<sup>1)</sup> Khruba Khao Pi,<sup>2)</sup> and other *khrua* from the past. Unlike those in the first group, the latter were perceived as *ton bun*<sup>3)</sup> (meritorious persons) who carried out monastery construction and renovation works. They could be very young and were widely known across many communities. In addition, Kwanchewan (2002) points out that there were recently a few monks who were popularly known as *khrua*. As a matter of fact, a number of *khrua* have emerged over the past three decades. Most of them are very young. Their charisma relies on various sources and practices. Some of them are famous for *ton bun* attributes, while others are praised as “magic monks” (Jackson’s term)<sup>4)</sup> (Thai: *phra saksit*, *kechi achan*) with a focus on prosperity religion (Jackson 1999b). By integrating the local Buddhist tradition of Lan Na with prosperity-oriented practices,

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1) In English literature, his name is also spelled *Sivichai*.

2) The closest disciple of Khruba Siwichai.

3) *Ton bun* is a form of holy men whose quality rests on great merit compiled in past lives, meditative practice, and campaigns to revive Buddhism through the construction and renovation of religious buildings, such as Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi in the past. As a result, they were believed to possess supernatural powers (Tambiah 1987, cited in Bowie 2014b, 687; Kwanchewan 2010, 2).

4) The traditional *khrua* concept is characterized by a belief in *ton bun* (Northern Thai, meritorious person) combined with a concept of Ariya Metteyya (Thai: *Phra Si Ariya Mettrai*), a legend of the fifth Buddha to come (see Cohen 2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2002), while the concept of a magic monk is characterized by a belief in possession of supernatural powers that emphasize the acquisition of wealth and power, such as the cult of Luang Pho Khun (Thai, revered father *Khun*) in the context of popular Buddhism (Jackson 1999a; 1999b; Pattana 2012). Luang Pho Khun (d. 2015) was one of the most famous magic monks in Thailand during the last three decades. These two concepts are different, but they overlap since they share a belief in possession of supernatural powers. As elaborated in the following sections, *khrua* has been recently reconstructed and redefined by different groups of followers. Modern *khrua* can be consumed by nontraditional followers as magic monks whose charismatic power is reserved more for popular religiosity (see also Amporn 2016).

modern *khruba* attract a large number of followers as well as significant monetary donations, not only from the northerners but also from worldwide devotees. Their monasteries are huge and attractively decorated. Their rites are exotic, their amulets are best-sellers, and the length of time they spend in the monkhood—which was a source of *khruba*'s charisma in the former days—is no longer relevant. This indicates that there are many types of *khruba* nowadays who do not fit into either of the two categories described above. It also implies that *khruba* have undergone periods of reevaluation over the course of time. The rise of *khruba* portrays heterogeneity or disjuncture (Appadurai 1996) of religious practices even though they continue to represent themselves as followers of the charismatic leader Khruba Siwichai and Lan Na Buddhism. Broadly speaking, the two major characteristics of modern *khruba* are: (1) the reproduction of external elements thought to be authentic in Khruba Siwichai's monastic style; and (2) reinterpretations of what it means to be a *khruba* that can be diverse yet overlapping at times. Hence, in order to understand the phenomenon of *khruba* today, it is necessary to understand modern Thai Buddhism and the construction of charisma in today's globalized world.

This paper consists of two parts. The first is an introduction to the study of *khruba*, including the historical context of *khruba*, dominant approaches to *khruba* studies, and the Weberian concept of charisma. The second part of this paper seeks to analyze the proliferation of *khruba* in contemporary Thai society. In particular, it seeks to show how *khruba* have constructed and redefined *khruba* charisma in various aspects pertaining to sources of legitimation, *khruba* in a contested space, heterogeneous practices, and biographies of three modern *khruba*. This paper is based on ethnographic data that the author collected during 2015–16 in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Tak, Mae Hong Son, and Sukhothai Provinces of Thailand, as well as Tachileik (Thai: *Tha Khilek*), Keng Tung (Thai: *Chiang Tung*), and Mong Yawng (Thai: *Mueang Yong*) in Shan State of Myanmar as part of his doctoral research.

### ***Khruba* in Their Historical Context**

The term *khruba* is well known among the northern Thais. In the Lan Na Buddhist world, *khruba* literally means “great teacher,” “teacher of teachers,” and one who has advanced knowledge and has attained spiritual perfection. In practice, this term is used as an honorary title either conferred or awarded to certain Buddhist monks in the Tai Buddhist communities of the upper Mekong region covering the area of today's Northern Thailand, eastern Shan State of Myanmar, northern Laos, and Xishuangbanna (Thai: *Sipsong Panna*)

in the Yunnan region (PRC),<sup>5)</sup> known as the Lan Na cultural area (Wasan 2013). In the northern *sangha* (former Lan Na kingdom) centuries ago, *khrua* was believed to be an official title conferred by the king (Kwanchewan 2002; Wilak 2010; Tanabe 2012). Up to the present time, in the *sangha* of Keng Tung (of the Tai Khuen and Tai Yai [Shan] ethnic groups), Mong Yawng (of the Tai Lue ethnic group) in eastern Shan State, and Xishuangbanna (of Tai Lue), *khrua* is still an official title conferred by the *sangha* (see Wat Tha Kradat 2005). In these areas, the *sangha* sets specific criteria while requiring a ceremony for conferring the title (Thai: *phithi thera phisek*). For instance, in the case of Keng Tung *sangha*,<sup>6)</sup> *khrua* should be at least 40 years old; should have served at least 20 years in monkhood; and should have been approved by the *sangha*, lay committee, community, and lay sponsors (Phra Swami Maha Chatchawan, Khrua Sam Nuan, and Phrakhrui Adunsilakit in Nakhon 2010; Wilak 2010, 15). In today's Xishuangbanna *sangha* system, *khrua* is the second-highest rank after *phra somdet sangkharat* (the supreme patriarch). In Thailand, the local Lan Na *sangha* was dissolved as a result of the centralization of the *sangha* by Bangkok's authority (the Sangha Act 1902). However, after that the term *khrua* has still been used unofficially by northerners in addressing their venerable monks.

The most renowned *khrua* in Thai Buddhist history is Siwichai (1878–1938), with his religious movement at the turn of the twentieth century in the north of Thailand (see a picture of Khrua Siwichai in Appendix).<sup>7)</sup> Statues of Khrua Siwichai have been built all over the northern region, especially in Chiang Mai and Lamphun Provinces. The most popular one is located at the foot of Mt. Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai City. In the academic world, scholars, both Thai and non-Thai, are attracted by his life and works. They have produced a steady stream of literature about him, including abundant biographical publications. Khrua Siwichai is the main figure in the study of charismatic monks and religious movements in the north of Thailand. Other charismatic monks related to him have also been studied, such as Khrua Khao Pi and Khrua Wong. Approaches employed by previous scholars in the studies of Khrua Siwichai have influenced studies of *khrua* movements in recent times (e.g., Keyes 1981; Tambiah 1984; Sopha 1991; Sommai 1994; 2000; Charnnarong 1997; Cohen 2001; 2002; Isara 2011; Tanabe 2004; 2012; Easum 2013; Bowie 2014a; 2014b; Sirisak 2016). Paul Cohen (2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2002) notes that

5) *Khrua* in the northeast of Thailand can be just ordinary monks.

6) Ranked from high to low (pronounced in Thai, Wat Tha Kradat 2005, 113): (1) *somdet atyatham* (the supreme *dhamma*), (2) *sangkhanayok*, (3) *khrua*, (4) *swami* or *sami*, (5) *swathi* or *sitthi*, (6) *maha*, (7) *phikkhu*, (8) *sammanen*.

7) His most famous achievement was mobilizing thousands of people to fund and construct a 12-kilometer road to the most famous pilgrim monastery of the North, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai.

*khruba* as well as local Buddhist tradition are unique practices in the Theravada Buddhism of this area, Lan Na Buddhism. This tradition is characterized by a belief in *ton bun* (as mentioned earlier). This tradition also relates to the concept of “Buddhist Millenarianism,” which can be seen by the terms used for Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi (as pronounced in Thai): *no phra phutthachao* (a scion of the Buddha) and *phrachao* (the Buddha). The two *khruba* were also called *phayatham* or *bodhisatta* (Thai: *phra phothisat*); it was believed that they were born to disseminate *dhamma* to laypeople while giving them opportunities to make merit in order to build up the moral community and prepare for the coming of the future and the fifth Buddha (Kwanchewan 2002, 262–293). Generally, it is believed that Khruba Siwichai’s practices were carried on by his disciples, such as Khruba Khao Pi (1889–1977) and Khruba Wong (1913–2000). The last living *khruba* to be known as a successor of Khruba Siwichai’s lineage is Khruba Phan of Wat Phraphutthabat Huai Tom, in Li District, Lamphun Province. Nevertheless, the following section will discuss a number of *khruba* who have recently claimed to be disciples/followers of Khruba Siwichai directly or indirectly.

### Three Dominant Approaches to *Khruba* Studies

Regarding the study of *khruba*, social science scholars have employed different approaches to examine charismatic attributes and their religious movements. Three dominant approaches are millenarianism (e.g., Keyes 1977; 1981; Tambiah 1984; Kwanchewan 1988; 2002; Sopha 1991; Bowie 2014a; 2014b), religious revivalism (e.g., Cohen 2000b; 2001; Tanabe 2004; 2012), and social memory (e.g., Turton 2006; Wasan 2013). Studies have shown that the charismatic power of Khruba Siwichai and his disciples relied greatly on meditative practices, building projects, and resistance movements against Bangkok’s authority. Nevertheless, studies of contemporary Thai Buddhism have revealed that the religiosity and expectations of lay Buddhists have changed through the course of modernization (see Pattana 1999; 2012; Stengs 2009; McDaniel 2011). Modern mass media, transportation, as well as the capital market have a considerable impact in shaping the modern-day religiosity of Thai Buddhists as well as in shaping modern *khruba*. Collectively, these reflect the fluid and irregular shapes of the nation’s religious landscape (e.g., Jackson 1999a; 1999b; Pattana 1999; 2008; 2012; Tanabe and Keyes 2002; Stengs 2009; McDaniel 2011). Furthermore, modernity produces crises that have made people insecure about the present and anxious about the future. The term “crises of modernity” is applied in the sense that modernity gives rise to fragmentation (Simmel 1978, cited in Tanabe and Keyes 2002, 6–7). The positive and negative consequences simultaneously

become embedded in people's minds and bodies. Interestingly, this term has also been used in reference to a variety of Buddhist monks who have established themselves through new forms of religious practices and are venerated by laypersons from various backgrounds who have created their own pieties to meet their everyday spiritual and psychological needs.

The main focus of *khrua* studies from the past to the present still revolves around three dominant approaches: millenarianism, Buddhist revivalism, and social memory, which are concerned with issues of ethnic identity, cultural politics, ethnic minorities, and social memory. This paper points out that these three approaches are inadequate to explain the current phenomenon of *khrua* and its proliferation during the past three decades. We need to look at the proliferation of *khrua* from a new direction. In the context of modern Thai society, *khrua* cannot be viewed as homogenous even though they are all called by the same name. In order to understand the dynamics of Thai Buddhist society and new forms of religious practices represented by modern *khrua*, this paper adopts a characterization of *khrua*'s adaptability as local subjects who have represented yet kept reinterpreting Lan Na Buddhism. *Khrua* in the present time is reinterpreted to serve different expectations of people in the context of prosperity religion. Moreover, in today's globalized and digitalized world, the *khrua* concept is no longer confined to specific areas or specific groups of devotees; *khrua* have crossed boundaries to become translocal *khrua* for devotees around the world.

### ***Barami* and the Concept of Charisma in *Khrua* Studies**

In social science literature, scholars have applied Max Weber's concept of charisma (Weber 1988) to explain various social movements led by charismatic figures. Similarly, in studies of Buddhist movements led by monks or charismatic figures, charisma is often referred to by the term *barami* (Pali: *parami*), although in fact there is no Pali or Buddhist term that exactly translates the Greek term "charisma" as used by Christians or in modern sociology. In Buddhism, *barami* means the perfection or completeness of certain virtues, which cultivates a way of purification while reaching a goal of enlightenment (Wisdom Library 2014). For Weber (1988), the legitimacy of charismatic authority rests on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him. He defines charisma itself as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Taylor 2012, 196–197).



The charisma of former *khruba*, particularly in the light of millenarianism, was characterized as a combination of the two above-mentioned concepts, as we have seen in the case of Khruba Siwichai, who reached *barami* as a result of great merit, meditative practice, and an ascetic mode of life. Subsequently, this *barami* was used as a fundamental source for the success of his movement because his followers believed that he possessed supernatural powers or an ability to lead them to certain goals. Vested with this influence, he could mobilize a large number of followers to carry out construction/renovation works (for religious and public services) throughout the northern region as well as to form a resistance movement against Bangkok's authority (see, e.g., Keyes 1981; Tambiah 1984; Sopha 1991; Isara 2011; Easum 2013; Bowie 2014a; 2014b). In particular, this paper adopts the Weberian concept of charisma to explain the construction of charisma of modern *khruba* while employing *barami* or charisma in the Buddhist context of supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional power.

### Modern *Khruba* in Contemporary Thai Society

In this study, the term “modern *khruba*” is used to refer neither to *khruba* who stood in opposition to traditional order in the pre-modern era nor to *khruba* who are characterized as less mysterious and more rational (by scientific and technological standards) as suggested by modernization theorists (e.g., Giddens 1990). Rather, “modern *khruba*” refers to the difference, disjuncture, and heterogenization that have led to the emergence, reevaluation, and re-intervention of cultural identities as suggested by Arjun Appadurai (1996). Additionally, “modern *khruba*” represents the re-enchantment of the world in which diverse arrays of opposition are engaged to subvert and undermine the imperialism of formal-rational logics and processes (see Jenkins 2000).

The emergence and rise of modern *khruba* are situated in the hybridized context of the declining influence of the Thai *sangha* and popular Buddhism and prosperity religion. The former is a result of the centralization of the *sangha* in the reign of King Rama V as well as the modernizing projects initiated by him. The Sangha Act in 1902 created the *sangha* bureaucracy, the modern ecclesiastical system with a hierarchy, royal titles, and monk-ranking system. Consequently, the balance between *lokiya* and *lokuttara*, or profane and sacred domains, of monks was disrupted (see Apinya 1993; 1998). Furthermore, the modernizing projects did not lead to the total disappearance of pre-modern beliefs and practices or other local Buddhist traditions. While different varieties of Buddhist tradition have remained meaningful, popular beliefs and practices have emerged or been revived. These include spirit medium cults (see Morris 1994; Pattana 1999), King



Chulalongkorn cults (see Stengs 2009), and new Buddhist schools like Thammakai and Santi Asoke (see Apinya 1993). With respect to the latter form of popular Buddhism, Jirachat Santayos (2010) notes that during the last three decades new *khru*ba have tried to draw a connection with Khruba Siwichai even though their religious practices are so diverse. Similarly, Wilak Sripasang, a university scholar<sup>8)</sup> (n.d.; interview, June 1, 2016), and Phrakhu Adunsilakit, abbot of Wat That Kham in Chiang Mai city<sup>9)</sup> (interview, March 9, 2016), have criticized practices of modern *khru*ba that deviate from *vinaya* (Thai: *phrawinai*; “leading out” or “learning”) and the *khru*ba tradition of Lan Na. In their view, modern *khru*ba’s practices have been changed considerably to serve intensified capitalist desires.

As in other Asian countries (see Pattana 2008; Rozenberg 2010), Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) coined the term “popular Buddhism” to describe various forms of everyday beliefs and practices carried out by specialists and ordinary people who identified themselves as members of the Thai Buddhist community. Popular Buddhism in Thailand incorporates the supernatural powers of spirits, deities, and magic that have emerged from the interplay between animism, supernaturalism, folk Brahmanism, the worship of Chinese deities, and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism. Peter Jackson (1999a; 1999b) has discussed popular Buddhism as a form of prosperity religion, where wealth is more important than salvation. Significantly, popular Buddhism and prosperity religion constitute the largest, liveliest, and most dynamic religious space in contemporary Thai Buddhist society (Pattana 2012, 1–2). In this regard, popular Buddhism and prosperity religion are flourishing within an individualistic culture since modernity produces crises and gives rise to fragmentation (Tanabe and Keyes 2002). It also breaks down the village-based sense of community, including more collective religious forms and rituals in Buddhism (Jackson 1989, cited in Pattana 2012, 55). Therefore, modern *khru*ba cannot be considered the same even though they bear the same title. Significantly, the modern concept of *khru*ba is not fixed and static; it has been reinterpreted and consumed in different ways by different groups of followers, unlike *khru*ba in the former days.

### ***Khru*ba in a Contested Space**

The proliferation of *khru*ba during the past three decades has not only evoked social sentiment but caused a social tension that draws modern *khru*ba into a contested space.

8) An expert in Lan Na culture and literature, he is also the originator of the expression “*khru*ba *uk kaet*,” as the author discusses in the following section.

9) He is also an ecclesiastical chief of Tambon (Thai: *chaokhana tambon*), Haiya.

Owing to their ability to integrate the values of local Buddhist tradition with the values of capitalism-consumerism as well as their ability to attract a large crowd of followers and monetary donations, modern *khruba* are viewed by society in both positive and negative ways. In this paper, *khruba* is considered a political arena in which certain groups compete for the construction of the meaning of being *khruba*. In order to understand this, two major strands must be discussed: the essentialist view and the modern view.

### 1. *Essentialist View of Khruba*

The essentialist view of *khruba* is found mainly among senior monks and scholar monks (mostly with titles or administrative ranks) in the northern region with groups of lay devotees and lay scholars. This group can be characterized by their ideas of essentialism and Buddhist reformism. From this point of view, *khruba* has an essence that can be traced back to the origin. Khruba Siwichai is established as the original version of *khruba*;<sup>10</sup> he represents the essence of the *khruba* concept in Lan Na Buddhism (this paper coins the term “a *khruba* role model”). From his practices to his activities and monastic style, they are used as a benchmark against which to measure modern *khruba*. Apparently, if even one thing deviates from the paradigm there can be no talk of a real *khruba*. This group condemns modern *khruba* and their proliferation in the North for their practices and activities, which are viewed as being contaminated by interaction with modernity and consumerism.

Monks in contemporary Thai Buddhism are criticized by certain scholars for their prosperity-oriented practices and commercialization of religion, which have removed them from *vinaya* and Buddhist doctrines. Commercialized forms of Buddhism (Thai: *phuttha phanit*), such as magic monks and Wat Phra Thammakai, are the main feature of today's Buddhist monks in modern Thai society that have led to the decline of faith and belief among Thai Buddhists (see, for example, Paisan 2003). Modern *khruba* in the North are condemned for the same reason, namely, that they deviate from the former *khruba*'s practices, specifically from those of Khruba Siwichai. In other words, rather than focusing on local practices they use *khruba* as a trademark to make a profit. This destroys the value and image of a “cultural treasure.” This kind of criticism can be found widely in general discussions, books, and academic seminars. Discussions with local people in the North have on many occasions also revealed criticisms of modern *khruba*'s practices. They believe that some modern *khruba* tend to please wealthy devotees from

10) As Isara Treesahakiat (2011, 107–126) suggests, in the contemporary cult of Khruba Siwichai, shrines, museums, and amulets are all significant indicators of the recognition of Khruba Siwichai's spiritual attainment and his status as a Lan Na *ton bun*.

afar more than local people. They also link modern *khru*ba with a recent series of corruption and sex scandals involving famous monks in the country, emphasizing the moral decay in Buddhist society. Phra Rat Pariyatmethi<sup>11)</sup> commented on modern *khru*ba (in Nakhon 2010, 16) in an academic seminar organized by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University,<sup>12)</sup> saying that in Chiang Mai today people praised *khru*ba not because of their good practices but because of something superficial, such as their outward appearance and external elements of monastic style. The most concrete and powerful discourse to attack the flourishing of *khru*ba today is *khru*ba *uk kaet*. *Uk kaet* is a northern Thai expression literally meaning “artificially rapid ripening.” The term is used to evoke an image of modern monks who have become *khru*ba by artificial acceleration (Wilak n.d.). Monks who have become *khru*ba by acceleration are not as good as real *khru*ba: they have not put enough effort into *dhamma* practice and have not acquired adequate knowledge or experience in either *dhamma* or *vinaya*. Hence, they are not real compared to former *khru*ba or even to senior monks who become *khru*ba in their old age. Recently, this negative expression has widely been used to generalize modern *khru*ba and is often found in academic writing.

Additionally, the sentiments of this group are very clear in their attempt to bring back the “good old days” to counter the present dark age. On the surface, *khru*ba has the affirmation of possessing the essence continuing from the past, which protects Buddhism from the negative influence of capitalism-consumerism as well as deviant *khru*ba. Yet, at a deeper level, “real-good *khru*ba” refers to the establishment of a *khru*ba role model with firm and fixed codes of conduct. For instance, Phrakhru Adunsilakit (interview, March 9, 2016) claimed that a “real-good *khru*ba” should perform the following spiritual exercises: (1) wear three pieces of rope; (2) wake up very early (at 4 a.m.); (3) eat one meal a day; (4) practice walking meditation; (5) wander in the forest or *thudong* (Pali: *dhutanga*); (6) adhere to *chatuparisutthisin*, or morality of pure conduct; (7) concentrate on mind purification; (8) pray alone; and (9) spread loving-kindness to all beings.<sup>13)</sup>

The essentialist view of *khru*ba is considered both an opponent of the proliferation of *khru*ba and an inspector for the religion since the *sangha*’s influence has been declining and its system has become dysfunctional. At the same time, this group instigates

11) Now known as Phra Thep Mangkhachan, the abbot of Wat Thaton in Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai, and the deputy ecclesiastical provincial governor of Chiang Mai.

12) Chiang Mai campus, one of the two Buddhist universities in Thailand; the other is Mahamakut Buddhist University.

13) He claimed that the nine codes were summarized from the practices of former *khru*ba he observed. He also showed me a booklet about *khru*ba’s code of conduct he was writing and planned to publish soon.

members of society, especially Buddhists, to care more about the religion and monks in terms of practices, teachings, and activities that are being ruined by modernity and consumerism. However, the problem is that such a romantic, linear, and fixed perspective in treating the concept of *khruba* has overlooked the dynamism of the *khruba* concept as well as *khruba* themselves. Kwanchewan (1988; 2002), Sopha Chanamun (1991), and Isara Treesahakiat (2011) suggest that the *khruba* concept has always been reinterpreted, redefined, and reevaluated by *khruba* themselves and their followers in order to fit in with specific socio-political contexts. From Khruba Siwichai to Khruba Khao Pi and Khruba Wong, *khruba* has never been linear or static. Moreover, the codes of conduct or criteria of being a “real-good *khruba*” suggested by this group are simply self-interpretation without any supporting sources. Even though they have accused modern *khruba* of deviation from “true” practices of the Lan Na Buddhism delineated by Khruba Siwichai, they have not yet ascertained the *dhamma* practices of Khruba Siwichai from primary sources.

## 2. Modern View of Khruba

The modern point of view is found among modern *khruba*, regardless of their age and *vassa* (Thai: *phansa*; annual retreat marking progress in monkhood), as well as their believers and followers. Even though some of them are over 60 years old, such as Khruba Noi of Wat Si Don Mun, they are grouped with this strand due to their flexible religious views. This group argues that even though *khruba* is a continuation of the past, the concept should be revised to fit in with the current context. They believe that *khruba* and local traditions can survive in the modern period by adapting. Undoubtedly, the elements of the monastic style and practices that are thought to be authentic Lan Na are referred directly to the charismatic leader, Khruba Siwichai. This paper’s research has shown that all modern *khruba* claim to be successors of Khruba Siwichai. According to this group, on the one hand Khruba Siwichai is the *khruba* prototype to follow, while on the other he is the point of departure for new interpretations. This point of view is not new: as this paper mentioned earlier, the concept of *khruba* has been reevaluated and reinterpreted from time to time since Khruba Siwichai’s period. Khruba Wong, the third generation in Khruba Siwichai’s lineage, believed that the world had changed so much that we could not do the same as the former *khruba*, that “everything is *anitcha*” (Pali: *anicca*, changeable, impermanent) (interview with Dok Kaeomi, August 22, 2015). This represents the group’s standpoint that adapting to the current situation is the solution to sustain the concept of *khruba*. Significantly, in Thailand the *khruba* title is not official—it is an award for “venerated monks” conferred by the people. This implies that they are *khruba* because people think they deserve the title. It comes to them by con-

sensus, not by force or money, and there is no reason to refuse it. Moreover, as we have seen, the modern *khru*ba's reputation has gone far beyond the regional and national levels. Due to modern technology and the relentless pursuit of luck, wealth, and ritual products, followers of modern *khru*ba come from many countries, especially China. Hence, modern *khru*ba is interpreted as being adaptable and flexible in meaning and form so as to appeal to global devotees.

After all, the two strands are considered two sides of the same coin as they share at least two things in common despite their different standpoints. First, they both engage in the process of establishing Khruba Siwichai as a *khru*ba role model. The essentialist view of *khru*ba argues that Khruba Siwichai's practices are authentic Lan Na tradition, which should be preserved and protected. But the modern view, despite *khru*ba's claim to be successors of Khruba Siwichai, believes that parts of Khruba Siwichai's practices, as well as Lan Na tradition, should be revised to better suit the needs of people in modern society. Therefore, for the former *khru*ba can survive through preservation and protection from modernity, whereas for the latter *khru*ba can survive by adaptation and interaction with modernity. Second, monks in both groups claim to be compliant under the *sangha* system. As mentioned earlier, most of the monks in the first group have royal titles or administrative positions that are similar to the titles attained by modern *khru*ba (*phrakhru*<sup>14</sup>) or monastery abbots). Due to past conflicts between the authorities and Khruba Siwichai and the recent political conflict between the Red and Yellow Shirts, modern *khru*ba are careful not to make stark distinctions between local and standard traditions. The political conflict today can be viewed as region-based (the North and Northeast versus the central region and the South). The northern region in general is viewed as the home of the Red Shirts as it is the stronghold of Thaksin Shinawatra, the ousted prime minister, and his political faction. Therefore, if they are not careful, *khru*ba from this region might be considered Red Shirt monks by opponents as well as the state. These two points illustrate that both groups follow the ideology of localism yet are under the influence of mainstream nationalism. Unlike Khruba Siwichai, they emphasize the ethno-cultural identity of Lan Na in certain aspects—e.g., language, music, way of life, and *khru*ba tradition—while identifying themselves as members of the Thai nation-state and the national *sangha*.

One thing that differentiates the modernizers from the essentialist *khru*ba group is their criticism of the weaknesses of the *sangha*. Modern *khru*ba seem discreet in not giving any comments on the *sangha*, whereas critical opinions are often voiced by monks from the other side. Phrakhru Adunsilakit (interview, March 9, 2016) explicitly remarked

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14) The first rank in the royal titles conferred by the King.

that the proliferation of *khruba* in the North reflects the weakness of the national *sangha* because it lacks any measure of clamping down or monitoring them. Moreover, some monks in ecclesiastical offices have good and mutually beneficial relationships with modern *khruba*.<sup>15)</sup>

The contestation between the two strands represents the social tension that has existed for decades. Significantly, it is noteworthy that *khruba* is a contested space: no group can claim the absolute right to assert the definitive and valid meaning of *khruba* for society. The concept has become open to new interpretations.

## Various Sources of Charisma

This section seeks to explore the construction of charisma by modern *khruba*. In particular, it investigates how they have drawn upon various sources and practices, including the values, beliefs, and traditions of Lan Na, in order to fit in with the heterogeneous expectations of people in popular Buddhism and prosperity religion.

### 1. *Legitimizing Khruba Status in Thai Society*

In recent times, Thailand has witnessed two separate yet overlapping groups of *khruba*. The first group constitutes those who have been officially conferred by the local Buddhist *sangha* of Keng Tung, Mong Yawng, and Tachileik in the eastern Shan State of Myanmar<sup>16)</sup> (see Wat Tha Kradat 2005), while the second group refers to those who have been unofficially recognized by lay devotees due to their charismatic-magical attributes. Most modern *khruba* in Thailand belong to the second group. As mentioned above, the conferring ceremony of monastic titles (Thai: *phithi thera phisek*), including the *khruba* title, has recently been found in the Tai Yai (Shan), Tai Khuen, and Tai Lue Buddhist communities of Keng Tung, Mong Yawng, Tachileik, and Xishuangbanna (they are independent of each other).<sup>17)</sup> Tai Buddhist *sangha* outside Thailand have been holding conferring ceremonies from time to time, and, significantly, it has been found that Thai monks have been promoted with different titles (e.g., *sitthi*, *sami*, *khruba*). In the con-

15) Similarly, Paisan Visalo (2000) commented that the *sangha* system had recently become ruined because of its centralized system and the patron-client relationship. He called it “anarchy in the *sangha*.”

16) Xishuangbanna’s *sangha* system also has a *khruba* title, but I have no evidence of whether any Thai monk has ever been promoted by the council of Xishuangbanna *sangha*.

17) This tradition is believed to be an old practice of the former Lan Na *sangha* as it shared its Buddhist ideology with other Tai communities in this region. However, until now there are no primary sources to support this claim.

ferring ceremony of Keng Tung *sangha* in 1998,<sup>18)</sup> eight monks from Thailand (mostly from the North) were conferred—six were given the title of *khrua* and two the title of *sitthi*. Among the six *khrua*, some are well known among Thai people, such as Khrua Bunchum (based in Tachileik, see Cohen 2000a; 2000b; 2001; Amporn 2016) and Khrua Montri of Wat Suthon Mongkhon Khiri in Phrae Province (Wat Tha Kradat 2005, 34–37). Another Thai monk who was conferred in this ceremony was Khrua Sam Nuan (Phrakhru Palat Anon Athittathammo) from Wat Tha Kradat in Chiang Mai Province. He is now 48 years old and occupies the abbot position. He is half-Shan, half-Tai Khuen and was born in the border area of Chiang Rai Province (near Myanmar). He was conferred as *sitthi* by Keng Tung *sangha* in 1998 and later as *khrua* in 2008 (interview with Khrua Sam Nuan, February 18, 2016). At the same time, he is serving as *phrakhru palat*, one of the personal staff of Phra Rat Wachiraphon<sup>19)</sup> of Wat Mahaputaram in Bangkok.

During the conferring ceremony, it was observed that a monk from Bangkok was also promoted to *khrua*. This evidently demonstrated that in Keng Tung *sangha* the criteria for being conferred are flexible. As Khrua Sam Nuan explained, Buddhist monks from Thailand and other countries are welcome, for they are all *dhamma* heirs of the Buddha. Therefore, regardless of nationality and ethnicity, any monk who has established a good practice and has contributed to Keng Tung is eligible for conferral by the *sangha*. Moreover, the conferment of monastic titles in Keng Tung and Mong Yawng has revealed its dependence on lay sponsors who have given financial support for the ceremony beyond the *sangha* and lay committees (interviews with Khrua Sam Nuan, February 18, 2016; and Somdet Atyatham of Mong Yawng *sangha*, February 23, 2016). Nonetheless, it should be noted that all of the titles conferred on Thai monks are honorary awards; they have nothing to do with any *sangha*'s authority. In 2016 conferring ceremonies were held in Xishuangbanna,<sup>20)</sup> Mong Yawng,<sup>21)</sup> and Tachileik.<sup>22)</sup>

Although official *khrua* seem to have legitimacy due to official conferment, the title does not have much effect on their popularity and charisma when compared to the other group of *khrua*. Therefore, even though it is an open gate for *khrua* in Thailand to be

18) The ceremony, the greatest event in 30 years, was held to celebrate the conferment of the 14th *Somdet Atyatham* (the supreme *dhamma*) of Keng Tung *sangha*, including seven monks in *khrua*, one in *sami*, and 11 in *sitthi* (Wat Tha Kradat 2005).

19) A monk with the royal title of *rat*, or *phra rachakhana*, has the authority to designate a group of monks to serve as his personal staff with the titles of *phrakhru palat*, *phrakhru samu*, and *phrakhru baidika* (Nirut 2007, 10–13, 158–186).

20) On February 19, 2016 at Wat Pacie Maharatchathan, no Thai monk was promoted.

21) On February 22–24, 2016 at Wat Ratchathanluang Hua Khuang, two monks from Chiang Rai Province were promoted to *swami*.

22) On December 23–25, 2016 at Wat Phrathat Sai Mueang, only Khrua Chao Thueang of Wat Ban Den in Chiang Mai Province was promoted to *khrua*.



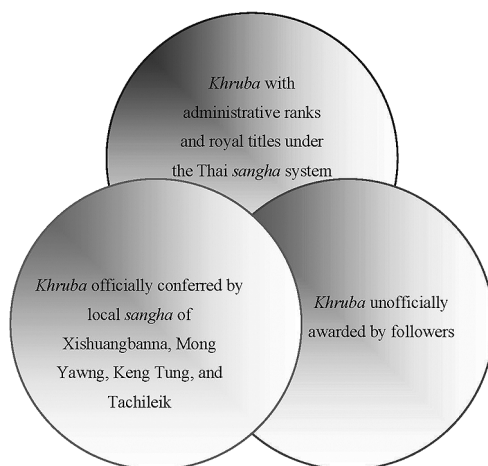


Fig. 1 Modern *Khruba* in Multidimensional Sources of Legitimation

legitimated officially, there are still not many *khruba* from Thailand who have been promoted by the *sangha*. This might be due to the inferior status of local *sangha* in relation to the Thai national *sangha*, as well as monastic titles given by them. Hence, modern *khruba* value recognition by the national *sangha* because of its superiority and the power given by the *sangha* system, e.g., the titles of monastery abbot, *phrakhru*, or higher.<sup>23)</sup> Most important, the charismatic status of modern *khruba* can be transferred symbolically through claims of being members of Khruba Siwichai's monastic lineage. Moreover, a modern *khruba* is able to draw upon various sources of legitimacy. He may start his vocation as a *khruba* who is unofficially awarded the designation by devotees. Thereafter, he could get promoted in the Thai *sangha* system while searching for a connection to get officially appointed as a *khruba* in other Tai Buddhist *sangha*, such as Khruba Sam Nuan, Khruba Chao Thueang, and Khruba Montri (see Fig. 1).

## 2. In the Name of Successors

A discourse of succession has two implications: first, it is a means to claim to be disciples of Khruba Siwichai's monastic lineage; and, second, it is a means to be recognized as authentic *khruba*. Through a discourse of succession, modern *khruba* have relied on various practices to achieve these goals. Some modern *khruba* claim to be direct descendants of Khruba Siwichai. A history of monastic lineage is heavily emphasized in the

23) Such as Khruba Ariyachat of Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan in Chiang Rai Province, who was promoted to (a rank) *phra rachakhana chan saman (vipassana thura)* as (the royal title) Phra Phawanarat-tanayan in 2016. He is now a *khruba* of the highest rank in the Thai *sangha* system.

biography of each modern *khru*ba. This is a way to show that his practices and teachings are authentic, passed down from generation to generation (especially from Khruba Siwichai). Succession in monastic lineage also means the transference of charisma from the master to the next in line. We have found that modern *khru*ba claim to be the second or third generation of Khruba Siwichai's lineage. Some of these examples are Khruba Ariyachat of Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan in Chiang Rai Province (see Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan 2010; So Sutthiphan 2011; 2013; 2015), Khruba Noi of Wat Si Don Mun in Chiang Mai Province (see amulet.in.th 2008; Wat Si Don Mun 2012), and Khruba Don of Wat Phraphutthabat Pha Nam in Lamphun Province (next in line to Khruba Khao Pi and Khruba Wong). Even though modern *khru*ba have many other masters, Khruba Siwichai has always been treated as the greatest master of all. Moreover, for those *khru*ba who could not link themselves with Khruba Siwichai directly, they would declare themselves to be successors of the Lan Na Buddhist tradition or the so-called *khru*ba tradition of Khruba Siwichai. The concept of successor in *khru*ba tradition has been widely used and expressed by a number of young *khru*ba through various practices, such as the reproduction of external elements of monastic style and participation in ceremonies and activities for late *khru*ba, including drawing connections with living *khru*ba—especially those who belong to Khruba Siwichai's lineage.

In order to claim a connection with Khruba Siwichai besides the discourse of succession through monastic lineage, some *khru*ba are rumored to be reincarnations of Siwichai. This is considered another way to affirm the status of the successors. Even though a number of disciples have insisted that Khruba Siwichai has reached *nibbana* (Thai: *nippahan*) and will no longer be reborn in this world, stories of his reincarnation are found in many places across the North. The stories have roots in the common belief that after the death of Khruba Siwichai, his *khwan* (literally life essence or soul) split into 32 pieces and fell in diverse directions. The concept of *khwan* is related to life after death and reincarnation. Khruba Siwichai's *khwan* is believed to have had 32 reincarnations, including some modern *khru*ba: Khruba Bunchum (Cohen 2001, 238), Khruba Chao Thueang (Ashley 2011), Khruba Ariyachat (So Sutthiphan 2011, 147–150), and Khruba Chao Nokaeofa (larndhamkruba.net 2010). Although they have different stories of reincarnation, it has been affirmed that the discourse of succession as well as the establishment of Khruba Siwichai as a *khru*ba role model are very important (see Fig. 2).

### 3. *Exotic Rituals and Practices*

Rituals (Thai: *phithikam*) and practices (Thai: *kanpatibat*) of modern *khru*ba can be considered a form of cultural creativity (Comaroff 1994, cited in Jackson 1999b) since they

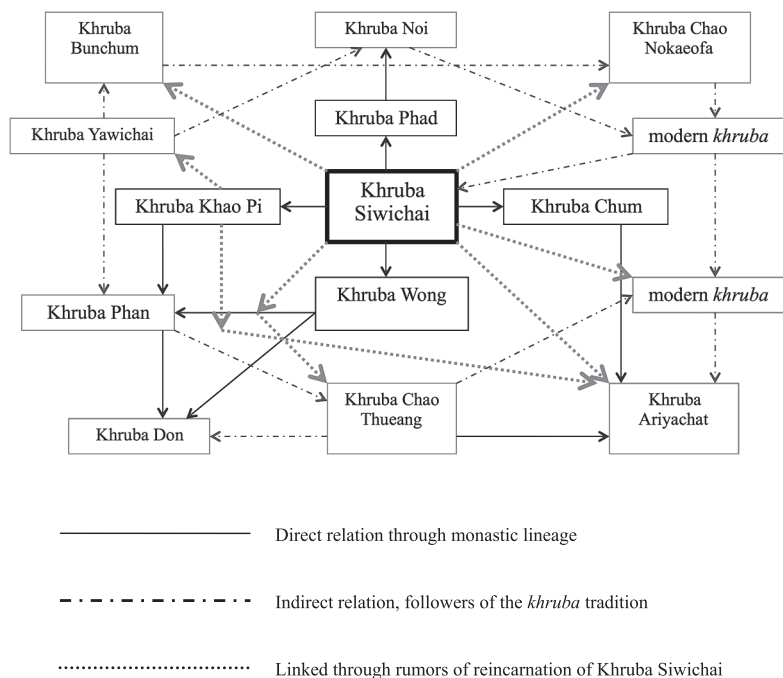


Fig. 2 Connections Drawn by Modern *Khruba* with Khruba Siwichai

are a combination of traditional values of Lan Na and luck-enhancing protective ritualism of prosperity religion. These include sacred and magical objects (amulets and memorabilia) associated with and/or sacralized by them. On the one hand, in rituals and practices the cultural value of *khruba* in Lan Na Buddhism has been highlighted as part of historical and ethno-cultural identity. On the other hand, it has been redirected to serve diverse expectations of people in the milieu of popular Buddhism and prosperity religion. Additionally, this process is driven by translocal, transreligio-cultural, and transnational forces in the globalization era. Below is an example of modern *khruba*'s ritual and practice known as *nirothakam*, or retreat.

*Nirothakam* (Pali: *nirodhakamma*; Thai: *kankhaokam*) is said to be one among the three kinds of retreat in the Lan Na Buddhist tradition.<sup>24</sup> In general, it is a way to purify one's mind and a way of mental practice of strict practitioners. *Nirothakam* is described as an old practice of Khruba Siwichai (Weerasathsophon 2010, 10–12). Usually this practice is carried out over three, five, seven, or nine days depending on the individual practitioner. Each range of days has its own meaning related to Buddhist principles.

24) Pali: *parivaskamma-nirodhakamma-dhutanga*.

Three days represent the triple gems (Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha), five represent the five Buddhas, seven represent the seven books of *phra aphitham* (Pali: *abhidhamma*), and nine represent *lokuttara* or the nine supramundane states<sup>25</sup> (*ibid.*, 41–42). The practitioner, generally a Buddhist monk, is restrained from eating, urinating, and defecating. He is not allowed to sleep or move away from his seat. His mouth must be closed at all times. He is allowed to drink only one alms bowl of water. He has to stay alone and away from the village, in a 20-square-meter dwelling or hut.

Khruba Noi and Khruba Ariyachat are famous for their practice of *nirothakam* in recent times. In their accounts, a manuscript in the form of a mulberry paper booklet (northern Thai: *papsa*) believed to be written by Khruba Siwichai is referred to as a primary source for the practice. In the case of Khruba Noi, his first *nirothakam* was held in 1994 during the severe illness of Khruba Phad, his master. The first *nirothakam* was thus aimed to show his determination in Buddhism as well as to exchange his life for Khruba Phad's. Incredibly, a miracle seemed to occur within two days as Khruba Phad's health improved significantly. Since then, Khruba Noi believed firmly in *nirothakam* and made a vow to practice it once a year (in February; Wat Si Don Mun 2012, 23–24). He recently declared his intention to continue the practice until the age of 70. Khruba Noi also noted that *nirothakam* should not be confused with *nirotsamabat* (Pali: *nirodha samapatti*) because the latter is a higher practice for the extinction of feeling and perception in order to reach the fruition of *arahantship* (*nibbana*; Sanskrit: *nirvana*) (interview with Khruba Noi, March 4, 2016). Details of *nirothakam*, in accordance with the manuscript of Khruba Siwichai, are clearly explained in his biography (see *amulet.in.th* 2008). During the first day of the 23rd *nirothakam* (February 18, 2016), the author personally witnessed the practice as a researcher at Wat Si Don Mun. During the three days of retreat, Khruba Noi conducted insight meditation and walking meditation alternately and drank only the water in an alms bowl. The water was prepared in accordance with special instructions in order to underline the exotic, sacred, and auspicious aspect of the ritual. It was obtained from holy wells with auspicious names in various places. The water from those different sources was then combined, filtered through seven layers of white cloth, and poured into a big silver alms bowl. Each layer of cloth was inscribed with *yantra* (Sanskrit term for symbolic diagrams; Thai: *yan*) in order to sacralize the water with protective and magical power. The site was sealed with nine layers of bamboo reeds (Thai: *ratchawat*) tied with a holy thread (Thai: *saisin*) at around 7:20 a.m. Once the site was sealed, no one was allowed to enter or even get within a 100-meter radius until the

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25) Four noble paths (Thai: *mak*; Pali: *magga*), four corresponding fruits (Thai: *phon*; Pali: *phala*), and ultimate enlightenment (Thai: *nipphan*; Pali: *nibbana*).

last day (at 6:09 a.m. on February 21, 2016).

In the case of Khruba Ariyachat, *nirothakam* was promoted by the monastery through various channels to attract the public (Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan 2010; So Sutthiphan 2011, 53–62). It was also associated with miraculous stories in order to affirm Khruba Ariyachat's charismatic status and the sacredness of the practice (see So Sutthiphan 2011, 57–62, 165–169). Despite claims of having the same origin, the two *khruba* differed in their practices. Khruba Ariyachat interpreted *nirothakam* as the practice of *nirotsamabat*, focusing on the 13 ascetic practices of *thudong* (*ibid.*, 62). The site was a small makeshift shelter made of bamboo and hay. Inside the shelter there was a big hole, 1 cubit deep and 2 cubits wide. Khruba Ariyachat sat in the hole in the meditation posture. He was not allowed to stand, eat, urinate, or defecate. He was only allowed to drink the water in an alms bowl. Four pieces of white cloth were used as cushions symbolizing the four noble truths, and the makeshift shelter was made from eight poles to symbolize the noble eightfold path. The Buddhist flag was put on the top of the shelter to symbolize wisdom; nine layers of *ratchawat* enclosing the makeshift shelter symbolized *lokuttara*, or the nine supramundane states. Khruba Ariyachat made a vow to perform *nirothakam* only nine times in his life. He kept changing the site every time and did not perform it annually. The first *nirothakam* was held in 1999 in a cave in Nan Province when he was a novice, while the fourth to eighth ones were held in different locations near Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan. The last *nirothakam* was held between January 4 and 12, 2013 at Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan.

The accounts of the two *khruba* clearly demonstrate their austerity in Buddhism and their paths to purify the mind, including a desire to follow traditional practice. They also aim to underline the *khruba*'s charismatic status as proven by the intense practice, the same as Khruba Siwichai did, which cannot be carried out by ordinary monks. This practice is also reminiscent of the self-mortification of the Gotama Buddha. Simultaneously, *nirothakam* of modern *khruba* these days has been redefined to serve expectations in popular Buddhism and prosperity religion, which focus on luck and wealth. The author also observed that *nirothakam* has become a big event advertised vastly by modern *khruba* in order to draw the attention of the public, especially on the last day of the practice. They combine a belief in the value of local Buddhist tradition (*ton bun*) with magical and supernatural powers in order to satisfy the desires of modern society (material wealth and earthly success). As Weerasathsophon (2010, 41) suggests, in general those who have made merit with a monk who has just finished *nirothakam* will gain great merit immediately. They will find heaven and *nibbana* and relief from sorrow and suffering, and they will stay happy, healthy, wealthy, and safe. Additionally, if someone wants to make a wish for good things, that will come true within a short time. Therefore, hundreds

of attendees gather on the last day of *nirothakam* each year. For example, during the last day of the *nirothakam* of Khruba Noi in 2016 (February 21), it was reported that up to 5,000 people attended, among them representatives from government offices and local administrative organizations (TLC News 2016). The attendees included a number of lottery enthusiasts who believed that it was a good opportunity to seek winning lottery numbers. Those numbers were related to Khruba Noi and *nirothakam* events, such as the date and time he came out from the site or his age and year of birth. Enthusiasts also bought several lottery tickets on that day in the hope of winning big prizes (*ibid.*). Not only did they make merit with *khruaba* on the last day of *nirothakam*, they also sought after *khruaba* who would perform rituals to enhance luck and wealth for all guests. After the alms-giving session in the morning was over, Khruba Noi performed a ritual for life prolongation (Thai: *phithi suepchata luang*) in accordance with Lan Na tradition. Khruba Ariyachat, in his eighth *nirothakam* in 2011, performed a ritual to commence the casting of the world's largest bronze statue of Khruba Siwichai. The project cost around 50 million baht, and the opening ceremony attracted 10,000 guests wishing to gain merit and luck (Wat Saengkao Phothiyan 2010).

Significantly, young *khruaba* these days consider *nirothakam* to be a rite of passage for becoming "real *khruaba*." Apart from the above-mentioned *khruaba*, there are a number of others who have claimed to be practitioners of *nirothakam*. These include Khruba Chaiya Patthaphi in Chiang Rai Province, Khruba Chao Nokaeofa in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Khruba Withun in Nakhon Sawan Province, and Khruba Kaeo and Khruba Sorayut in Lampang Province. For these less-popular *khruaba*, *nirothakam* has become a significant way to promote *khruaba* charisma as well as attract more believers and devotees.

#### 4. Sacred-Magical Objects

Various kinds of sacred-magical objects are produced either for sale or as gifts: tablets, medallions, Buddha images, coins, *takrut*,<sup>26)</sup> *yantra*, rosaries, etc. Amulets in the Thai context, as Stanley Tambiah (1984, 196) explains, are *khruang rang khong khlang*, where *khong khlang* refers to an object having sacred or supernormal powers and *khruang rang* refers to an amulet. Amulets are used to testify to *khruaba*'s magical and supernatural powers while simultaneously satisfying the desires of devotees and followers of prosperity religion. Amulets have also been used extensively for merit-making-cum-fund-raising schemes and have contributed to the expansion of *khruaba*'s worldwide networks. Therefore, they have played a vital role in the construction of charisma by modern *khruaba* while

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26) A tiny rolled metal amulet inscribed with magic words.

demonstrating the shift in practices of *khruba* in their efforts to interact fluidly within the current context.

Official biographies as well as academic works on Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi have largely portrayed the two *khruba* as *ton bun* or *bodhisatta* (Kwanchewan 2010, 2). With respect to sacred-magical objects, Khruba Siwichai never produced them for sale or rent (Thai: *chao*). It is believed that during his entire lifetime Khruba Siwichai made only one type of miniature Buddha figure: he used sun-dried sticky rice blended with other materials in accordance with local tradition to produce *phrachao khao khu chiwit* (miniature Buddha figures made of rice, the life partner). Other kinds of amulets were quietly made by his disciples and lay devotees without his knowledge. Miniature statues and clay tablets were made out of Khruba Siwichai's hair. The amulets were intended to be circulated among devotees and believers of Khruba Siwichai rather than sold, as these items had not undergone chanting or consecrating (Thai: *pluksek*) by Khruba Siwichai or others (Sirisak 2016, 343–362). All of the amulets that are now for sale were mass produced later, after his death (see Sommai 2000, 54; Sirisak 2016, 345–364). In the case of Khruba Khao Pi, pieces of white cloth with prints of his hands and feet were distributed for free, while his first batch of amulets was produced officially for sale in 1952 (when he was 64). These were in the form of a medallion (Thai: *rian*) and had the batch name *run raek Khruba Khao Pi sali ha king* (first batch of Khruba Khao Pi, the five-branched Bodhi tree). Three batches followed in 1957, 1975, and 1976<sup>27</sup> (interview with Inpun and Sukchai, senior devotees of Khruba Khao Pi, July 25–26, 2015; see also Maitri n.d., 80–81). The purpose of producing these amulets was to raise money for his construction works.

Both *khruba* above represented the idea of sacred-magical objects testifying to their high degree of holiness, as a result of austerity in *dhamma* and meditation for a very long time. Tambiah (1984, 335) has suggested that the charisma of Buddhist saints is concretized and sedimented in objects as the repositories of power. These objects eventually become purchasable and are used by laymen to influence, control, seduce, and exploit fellow laymen for worldly purposes. The cult of amulets in Thailand has roots in traditional beliefs and practices concerning magic and supernaturalism, but Pattana (2012, 112) notes that from the tenth or eleventh century to the fifteenth, the religious situation in mainland Southeast Asia changed. Buddhist communities in mainland Southeast Asia have come to be characterized by a fascination with miraculous relics and charismatic, magic monks as they interact more with modernity and capitalism-

27) These were named *Khruba Khao Pi sali ha king* (Khruba Khao Pi, the five-branched Bodhi tree, the second edition), *rian maha lap* (medal of super luck), and *rian run 102* (medal batch 102) respectively.



materialism. So, amulets are perceived and consumed differently from the way they were in the past.

Buddhism was characterized more by miraculous relics and charismatic, magic monks than by organized sectarian tradition. In the 1980s and 1990s, rapid economic growth stimulated the proliferation of prosperity religion, such as the cults of King Chulalongkorn (see Stengs 2009), Guanyin (Thai: *Chao Mae Kuanim*), and some royal spirits (see also Jackson 1999a; 1999b; McDaniel 2011). The craze for prosperity religion continued to mushroom after the economic crisis in the mid-1990s and early 2000s (see Tanabe and Keyes 2002; Pattana 2012).

Jackson (1999a; 1999b) and Pattana (2012) have also discussed the marketing strategy in the naming of batches of amulets. This practice reflects a shift in the significance of amulets in contemporary Thai society, where people believe that wealth is the answer to most problems. Pattana (2012, 96–100) points out that amulets become sacred signifiers that spiritually and psychologically assure their holders that they will achieve their goal of gaining material wealth rather than providing their holders with protective power and moral strength as was the case in the past. Amulet entrepreneurs and monks have made linguistic and symbolic connections between monks' supernatural power and charisma, and people's desire for material wealth, as in the case of Luang Pho Khun's amulet batches. Modern *khru*ba's amulet batches are also named in the same way, such as *phra arahan trai phakhi maha lap* (images of the three *arahants*, great luck) and *takrut setthi ngoen lan* (*takrut*, the millionaire) of Khruba Noi, *nang kwak sap saen lan* (*nang kwak*, a beckoning woman, 100 billion baht of wealth) and *rian rahu ruai sap* (*rahu*,<sup>28</sup> wealth) of Khruba Ariyachat, *phra kring siwali phokkhasap phu mi chaichana haeng phaendin* (miniature image of Phra Siwali,<sup>29</sup> who has material wealth and gains victory over the land) of Khruba Chaiya Patthaphi in 2013, and *salika riak sap* (medallion of Salika bird, which brings wealth) of Khruba Chao Nokaeofa in 2013. Amulet-making projects are named in order to create excitement among the public. Some examples include *sutyot watthu mongkhon haeng tamnan prawattisat* (the greatest auspicious objects in history) of Khruba Ariyachat in 2014 and *khurang raek khurang diao nai rop kao pi haeng kan phian wiriya thana barami* (the first time and one time only after nine years of perseverance, giving, perfection) of Khruba Yawichai in 2016 (in Chiang Mai Province).

*Khru*ba and amulet entrepreneurs, including their business connections, have employed many business strategies to attract the public as well as to create a unique

28) A god in nine celestial bodies in Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.

29) Pali: *Sivali*.

selling point. Two particularly important strategies can be seen in various channels, including TV, printed materials, Internet websites and social media, and word of mouth via translators. These strategies involve providing information about the production of amulets and their efficacy, as well as sharing magical-supernatural stories from amulet holders. With regard to the first strategy, among a wide range of amulets, one particular batch of miniature images of Khruba Noi with the batch name *rup muean Khruba Noi run 1*<sup>30)</sup> (image of Khruba Noi, the first batch) in 2013–14 was claimed to have protective and magical powers to bring luck and success in everything upon request (a vinyl poster in Wat Si Don Mun; Khaosod 2016). The sacralizing of the images was special, as they had undergone chanting and blessing (Thai: *athitthan chit lae pluksek*) by Khruba Noi for over three months during the retreat of the rains (Thai: *khao phansa*) and during *nirothakam* in 2013. Moreover, during this period these amulets were submerged in a full alms bowl of a special herbal oil called *wan kai daeng*<sup>31)</sup> (red rooster herbal oil) together with 108<sup>32)</sup> other sacred herbs (Thai: *wan saksit*). Before being packaged, they were blessed again by Khruba Noi. The advertisement stirred the enthusiasm of the public by claiming that this batch of amulets was a limited edition and no rain checks could be given, because the concrete molds of the amulets would be destroyed on February 23, 2014. For Khruba Ariyachat, *Mae Nang Kwak* has the specific name of *Mae Thong Phan Chang* (the woman of a thousand scales of gold). It is a miniature statue of a kneeling woman beckoning with one hand, which is said to represent her calling clients and buyers to shops. Generally, in other places, the *mae nang kwak* image has a slender shape and a beautiful face; but in Khruba Ariyachat's version it has a round shape and is the so-called *nang kwak uan* (fat *nang kwak*). This is Khruba Ariyachat's own creation in order to represent fertility and eternal wealth. Recently Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan claimed to be the originator of *nang kwak uan* in Thailand, and it has come to be regarded as a symbol of Khruba Ariyachat (So Sutthiphan 2013, 126). Verses for invocations (Thai: *khatha bucha*) and procedures to worship the amulets are included in order to get immediate and great results. For example, *mae nang kwak-mae thong phan chang* needs to be placed facing outward from the shop and should be worshipped with either a glass or a bottle of water every day. Fruits should be presented either every day or once a week. A wish can be made by lighting either 9 or 16 incense sticks and asking for help in commerce, luck, or wealth. Afterward, the verses for the request (Thai: *khatha aratthana*) should be recited.

30) In varying materials and price ranges, e.g., gold (100,000 baht) and brass (500–700 baht).

31) This herb is believed to have a high magical potency to increase personal charm, luck, and protection. It is very rare and most sought after because it grows deep in the forest in Myanmar, not in Thailand (baanjompra.com 2015).

32) The number 108 is auspicious in Buddhism and is often highlighted by modern *khruba*.

Below is the author's translation of verses for *khatha aratthana* upon *mae nang kwak-mae thong phan chang* (*ibid.*, 127–128).

*ohm the revered grandfather green mountain who has only one daughter  
named Nang Kwak  
she was loved by women and men who saw her  
they, merchants keep me and go to trade till up to the city of deities  
I shall sell rings, and get a hundred thousand tanan<sup>33)</sup> each day  
I shall do all kinds of trade with the flow  
I shall sell gold, and get a full basket of gold in return  
take 103 baskets home, be a millionaire within three months  
within three years, own a ship for trade  
the hermit is the Lord who brings success only to me  
(Pali verse) e hi chit tang pi yang ma ma ma maha la pha pha wan tu me luck, money from all  
directions shall flood in to me  
(Pali) samathi ma e hi ma ma sap phe cha na pha hu cha na  
A short version: (Pali) e hi chit tang maha la pha pi yang ma ma ma ma*

Frequently modern *khruaba*, in collaboration with amulet entrepreneurs, broadcast video clips on TV and YouTube to promote their amulets, such as “Khui fueang rueang Phra Khruba Ariyachat” (a talk about amulets with Khruba Ariyachat) (YouTube, Wanchai Suphan 2014).<sup>34)</sup> Another interesting technique in the amulet business is shared by Khong (pseudonym), the owner of a foundry and minting factory in Chiang Mai Province<sup>35)</sup> (interview, September 7, 2016). According to Khong, a famous *khruaba* in Lamphun Province makes use of modern communication technology and a highly commercialized strategy to draw the crowds and channel the amulets to potential customers by taking reservations for his new batch of amulets only on Facebook. Reservations commence at 9 a.m. because 9 is an auspicious number in Thai Buddhist culture, representing growth, progress, and advancement. On one day in 2015, in less than a minute, approximately 5,000 reservations had been made by worldwide customers (mainly from China and Singapore), with a few hundred remaining.

Regarding the second point, stories of sacredness are emphasized and conveyed through individual experiences of the holders in order to affirm the efficacy of the *khruaba*'s amulets. This is another example showing the connection between the charismatic,

33) Name of an ancient measurement, a vessel made of coconut shell for ladling rice.

34) There are more video clips in the series “Khui fueang rueang phra” with other modern *khruaba*, such as Khruba Kritsana (in Nakhon Ratchasima Province in 2013) and Khruba Nuea Chai (in Kanchanaburi Province in 2012).

35) He is also a vice chairman of the Northern Thai Amulet Association (Thai: *Samakhom Phrakhrueang Phra Bucha Thai Phaknuea*) sub-region, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hong Son Provinces.

supernatural powers of Buddhist monks and secular affairs. Below is an example of the stories.

Praphasi (pseudonym) is a local politician serving as a representative of the sub-district municipality (Thai: *samachik sapha thetsaban tambon*) in Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province. Her experience with amulets of Khruba Noi began in 2012 after a decision to run for election in the subdistrict municipality. She was worried because she was an independent candidate without backing from any political party. At first she did not know Khruba Noi, but her son (in his early 20s), who was a spirit medium and close devotee of Khruba Noi, took her to him to ease the worry. Khruba Noi gave her magic candles called *thian siwali doen dong* (Phra Siwali wandering in the forest). These candles were believed to have the power to increase personal charm and enable one to persuade others. Khruba Noi instructed Praphasi to light the candles and pray to them three days before the election. Even though he did not give her any mantra (Thai: *mon, khatha*), Praphasi said, “Believe it or not, elderly people in the villages could remember my number [number 7] while forgetting the numbers of other candidates.” Eventually, among 30 candidates, she was elected by the second-highest number of votes (interview, November 4, 2015). Since then, she and her family have become devotees of Khruba Noi. She also wore around her neck a locket of Khruba Noi, surrounded by diamonds, in order to protect her from harm while invoking luck and success for her business.

### Three Modern *Khruba* in Multidimensional Charisma

This section provides short biographies of three modern *khruba* in order to provide a clearer picture regarding the dynamism of the *khruba* concept and the flexibility of modern *khruba* in contemporary Thai society whose charisma has been perceived and consumed in multidimensional ways.

#### 1. *Khruba Phan of Wat Phraphutthabat Huai Tom, Lamphun Province*

An 88-year-old abbot, known to be of Khruba Siwichai’s lineage, succeeded to the abbot position from his master and his older cousin, Khruba Wong (d. 2000). Khruba Wong was generally perceived as one of the three greatest *khruba* of Lan Na after Khruba Siwichai and Khruba Khao Pi. Khruba Phan has been promoted in the Thai *sangha* system to Phrakhru Phinitasatham (see Kwanchewan 2010). His monastery is surrounded by 10 villages established by Khruba Wong. A majority of the population are Karen who have relocated from other northern provinces since 1946. Khruba Phan is still a beloved master of the villagers in the community as well as of the Karen in other communities

who have followed the three greatest *khru*ba.<sup>36)</sup>

During Khruba Phan's period, he has tried to maintain the teachings and practices of Khruba Wong in order to maintain the religious community of Huai Tom. For example, villagers are asked to strictly observe the five moral precepts (Thai: *sin*, Pali: *sila*).<sup>37)</sup> They are not allowed to raise livestock and have to abstain from eating all types of meat inside the community. They are required to regularly pray to the Buddha(s) while counting the rosary, either in front of their household altars or in the monastery's hall. Only vegetables can be offered as alms to monks in the morning. Drugs and alcohol are prohibited. On Buddhist holy days, villagers have to go to the monastery to make merit, listen to sermons, and pray.<sup>38)</sup> Every time they visit the monastery they are required to wear Karen traditional dress. All of these regulations were issued by Khruba Wong, and villagers are required to observe them very strictly otherwise they are expelled from the community.

However, as Kwanchewan (2010, 4) has pointed out, Khruba Phan's reputation as *ton bun* is lesser than that of former *khru*ba. Moreover, his picture is rarely included in posters or books of Thai saints. Even though Khruba Phan is not very popular, Huai Tom's religious network has been maintained and expanded through various activities. For example, the mummified body of Khruba Wong has been preserved in the monastery to attract visitors and pilgrims. The Robe Changing Ceremony for Khruba Wong is organized on May 17 each year. This ceremony is the monastery's most important event and is used to maintain and expand its network as well as gain a huge amount of donations.

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36) Mikael Gravers (2012) suggests that Karen imaginary and notions of royalty are preconditions for a new era governed by Buddhist ethics that will bring peace and prosperity. Royalty appear in Karen myths, legends, and prophecies since Karen believe they are like orphans without a king and leader. Buddhist Karen await the next Buddha, Ariya Metteyya, preceded by a righteous Karen leader. Thus, *khru*ba and other charismatic monks are perceived as lords, such as Khruba Djau La (a Karen monk during 1960–70) who was called by disciples (in Karen) *Bhagava* (the noble lord, an epithet of the Buddha), *Phu Ga Cha* (Lord Father), *Ga Cha Yuah* (God), and *Djau Pha* (King). Similarly, Khruba Siwichai, Khruba Khao Pi, and Khruba Wong were also called by Karen devotees Ka Cha Bang, Ka Cha Wa, and Ka Cha Pho, the “Yellow-Robed Lord,” the “White-Robed Lord,” and the “Little Lord,” respectively. Moreover, these lords were certainly more powerful than traditional lords because they owned sacred places represented by pagodas, reliquaries, and monasteries scattered throughout the land (Kwanchewan 2002, 275–276). According to the Karen in Huai Tom, Khruba Wong gave them knowledge and development, and thus “we are no longer orphans” (Gravers 2012, 357–359).

37) The five precepts constitute the basic code of ethics undertaken by lay followers of Buddhism. The precepts are commitments to abstain from harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication (Getz 2004, 673).

38) In April 2015 the Huai Tom community was awarded by the government with the office of Buddhism, as 100 percent of the villagers were able to follow the five moral precepts. This was the first community in the country that received this award.

Recently, the event has become bigger and more popular, with more than 10,000 people attending between 2015 and 2016 (see a picture of the ceremony in Appendix). In addition, as observed in this research, the event has been supported by government agencies, both provincial and national.<sup>39)</sup> During the last decade Khruba Phan has gained a reputation as a magic monk among amulet seekers and traders since he produced amulets of a legendary creature with four ears and five eyes (Thai: *maeng si hu ha ta*). According to legend, the creature brings material wealth to its owners. Advertisements on websites as well as on banners in the monastery announce that Khruba Phan has inherited the *maeng si hu ha ta* mystical mantra from Khruba Wong.

## 2. *Khruba Noi of Wat Si Don Mun, Chiang Mai Province*

Khruba Noi is 64 years old and has been promoted in the Thai *sangha* system as Phrakhru Sirisilasangwon. He succeeded his late master, Khruba Phad, to the abbot position. Khruba Phad, who was known as one of the disciples of Khruba Siwichai, was renowned for his magical powers, amulets, and traditional healing. Khruba Noi is the closest disciple of Khruba Phad and considered to be the only one who has inherited the secret knowledge of magical practices. Significantly, the reputation based on the magical practices of Khruba Phad's school is nationally recognized: members of the royal family have paid numerous visits to the monastery since Khruba Phad's time. Therefore, Khruba Noi does not only represent the Lan Na Buddhism of the North idealized by Khruba Siwichai, he also represents the mystical-magical art of Khruba Phad's school.

His external elements of monastic style are similar to Khruba Siwichai's, which are quite different from the norm:<sup>40)</sup> dark brown robes with a chest band, shawl, rosary, walking stick, hat, and peacock or palm leaf fan. He states that his *dharmma* practice is as strict as the practice of the former-day *khruba*. For instance, he subsists on minimum sustenance, practices insight meditation and walking meditation every morning and night, and owns neither a TV nor a cell phone. Moreover, he strictly adheres to the *dharmma* teaching for his disciples in the monastery. Due to this, he has few fellows: only four monks (including him) have been living in the monastery recently (interview with Khruba Noi, March 4, 2016). Furthermore, he conducts *nirothakam* (retreat) every year, as mentioned earlier (February 18–21 in 2016). However, what make him popular at the international level are not his authentic practice of Lan Na Buddhist tradition but rather

39) The deputy supreme commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces presided over the ceremony (as a chief layman) in 2016.

40) Isara calls it "non-reformed Mahanikai style": non-reformed Mahanikai refers to monks who wear the traditional style of monastic robes, whereas reformed Mahanikai refers to monks who wear Thammayut nikai's style of robes (see Isara 2011, 85–88).

his magical practices and sacred-magical objects. In recent times, with his image of a magic monk, he is popular among Chinese businesspersons from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia (interview with a female Chinese amulet trader from Beijing, August 14, 2015). Every day, hundreds of people come to be blessed by him as well as to buy his amulets. His amulets are some of the most sought after among amulet traders and collectors. Two of Khruba Noi's amulets were awarded the best amulet of the year in 2013 in a competition organized by amulet traders and collectors in Bangkok.<sup>41)</sup> All of the amulets are believed to bring prosperity, success, charm, happiness, and fortune to their owners. Khruba Noi also sends amulets and protective objects to the military camp in Chiang Mai. As a result, he gains great support from the military camp for his activities every year (interview with a male devotee, November 1, 2015).

He also performs rituals to increase good fortune for those who need it. His mantra is a combination of several languages: northern Thai, Shan, Chinese, Burmese, and Pali. It is exotic, mystical, and sacred. He created this unique mantra by himself to bestow all with prosperity, wealth, health, and fortune. The monastery is fronted with an amulet shop with full-time staff members ready to service customers, like a convenient shop of fortune. As promoted by the monastery, a portion of the proceeds go toward charitable activities, for instance, the construction of a small hospital where Khruba Noi donated 45 million baht for the land and buildings<sup>42)</sup> (opened in March 2015). The hospital was then given to the government under the tutelage of the Ministry of Public Health. This enhances Khruba Noi's charisma as a development monk (Thai: *phra nakphatthana*). His main sponsor during the last decade has been the owner of a big petrochemical company in Bangkok along with his family. Every year they donate more than one million baht to the monastery. They also provide financial support and construction materials required by the monastery. Inside the monastery are signboards advertising that the monastery uses the company's products for religious benefit (see a picture of Khruba Noi in the 2016 *thot kathin* ceremony in Appendix).

### 3. *Khruba Ariyachat of Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan, Chiang Rai Province*

Khruba Ariyachat is very young (35 years old), and his 10-year-old monastery is gigantic and beautifully decorated. In it is the world's largest bronze statue of Khruba Siwichai, built in 2009 (9 meters long and 12 meters tall) and soon joined by the large statues of Khruba Khao Pi and Khruba Wong; together they are called the three greatest *khruba* of Lan Na (see a picture of the statues in Appendix). Khruba Ariyachat is originally from

41) Pramai Dot Com Company and Association of Countrywide Collectors of New Amulets.

42) He is continuously raising funds for the hospital.



Lamphun Province and a disciple from Khruba Siwichai's lineage (from Khruba Chum of Wat Wang Mui-Chai Mongkhon). He started his vocation under the patronage of Khruba Chao Thueang of Wat Ban Den in Chiang Mai (see Ashley 2011), one of the most popular *khruba* in recent times.<sup>43)</sup> After an acrimonious conflict with Khruba Chao Thueang, he left and built his own monastery named Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan (interview with a senior devotee of Khruba Chao Thueang, November 9, 2015). Apart from the link with the former *khruba* through monastic lineage, a story of reincarnation also enhances his saintly status. During this research, it was discovered that when he was young, he claimed that he was the reincarnation of Khruba Khao Pi (interview with a female devotee from Bangkok, December 19, 2015). Later, after the establishment of Wat Saengkaeo, he was rumored to be the reincarnation of Khruba Siwichai instead (YouTube, WoodyTalk 2016). As described in his biography, his face looks like that of Khruba Siwichai's statue (So Sutthiphan 2011). Even though he himself never claimed to be a reincarnation of Khruba Siwichai, he has a habit of walking slowly with the slightly hunched posture of an elderly person.

His external elements of monastic style are similar to Khruba Siwichai's and Khruba Noi's in representing Lan Na Buddhism. Moreover, people are often impressed by his good looks, charm, and soft and gentle style of speaking and acting. He likes to bond with his followers and visitors, especially men, through physical contact such as holding hands, hugging, gently touching their shoulders and backs, which is thought to be a means of transferring his magical and spiritual powers. Regarding the practice of Lan Na Buddhism idealized by Khruba Siwichai, he conducted *nirothakam* just like Khruba Noi, as mentioned previously. Khruba Ariyachat's supporters are mostly well-to-do middle-class people from the central region, especially business owners. The grand hall was sponsored mainly by one of the biggest television companies in Thailand. Khruba Ariyachat invites TV stars to join him on numerous occasions, including shows and concerts organized in order to attract local people. He frequently appears in newspapers, amulet magazines, and TV programs. This confirms his reputation as a holy monk at the national level. At the *thot kathin* festival<sup>44)</sup> in 2015 he collected around eight million baht in donations, while in 2016 he collected around 16 million baht (see a picture of Khruba Ariyachat in 2016 *thot kathin* ceremony in Appendix). For his birthday celebration (in January 2016),<sup>45)</sup> he held a big festival and invited one of King Bhumibol's granddaughters to

43) Khruba Chao Thueang was rumored to be the reincarnation of Khruba Siwichai, too (Ashley 2011, 182).

44) *Thot kathin* is celebrated annually during October and November. The practice consists, in essence, of giving new robes to the monks who come out of retreat at the end of the rainy season.

45) It was also the celebration of the ninth year, ninth month, and ninth day of the establishment of Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan.

preside over the ceremony. Popular TV stars and hosts were also present with the idea of producing a special episode on TV (see YouTube, WoodyTalk 2016). On that day, Khruba Ariyachat donated large sums of money to a hospital, schools, students, and communities as an act of great merit making (Thai: *than*) of a great man. Interestingly, his two extracted teeth were auctioned for more than three million baht and sold to wealthy female devotees from Bangkok.

He has also produced a wide range of amulets. His monastery is often used as a site for consecration ceremonies (Thai: *phithi phuttha phisek*) for amulets and medallions. Three biographies of Khruba Ariyachat have been produced by a well-known publisher in Bangkok, and half of them are devoted to stories about his sacred-magical objects as well as his supernatural powers (see So Sutthiphan 2011; 2013; 2015).

## Conclusion

*Khruba* have consistently played a meaningful role in local Buddhist communities of Northern Thailand for generations. Modern *khruba* continue to represent themselves as followers of the charismatic Khruba Siwichai and Lan Na Buddhism. However, during the past three decades they have undergone a period of flourishing that involves heterogeneous beliefs and practices in the context of the declining influence of the *sangha* and popular Buddhism. They have constructed *khruba* charisma through various practices that can be analyzed using two major approaches. First, their legitimization occurs through the discourse of succession in Khruba Siwichai's monastic lineage and the *khruba* tradition in which Khruba Siwichai was established as a role model. All of the modern *khruba* claim to succeed Khruba Siwichai through, for example, external elements of monastic style, *nirothakam* (retreat), or a campaign for the construction and renovation of religious buildings. These practices are meant to signify the transference of charisma symbolically to the next in line based on a claim by Khruba Siwichai. In this sense, this process signifies a continuation of the past. However, in the second approach, the reproduction of *khruba* has allowed us to see the disjuncture of the past. We have seen that the concept of *khruba* is malleable enough to allow for different interpretations, even to the point of allowing modern *khruba* to combine the values of materialism and consumerism in their practices. This paper has argued that these are the key factors in the success of the construction of charisma as well as in the proliferation of modern *khruba* at the present time. *Khruba* as local subjects are in the process of creating translocal *khruba* as they interact with the global culture. This paper has presented many cases of modern *khruba* who are more involved in religious commercialization and prosperity religion,

while highlighting the value of Lan Na through a discourse of sacred-mystical power acquired from a local and special set of knowledge. Nonetheless, this process is carried out carefully under strategic loyalty to the Thai state, the monarchy, and the *sangha* as illustrated through examples of how *khruba* maintain good relationships with the monarchy, influential politicians, high-ranking officials, and others in the *sangha* system. These processes serve to enhance our understanding of the construction of charisma by modern *khruba* while explaining why the concept of *khruba* is still meaningful in the modern Buddhist society of Thailand.

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- A female devotee of Khruba Noi, February 18, 2016.
- A female devotee of Khruba Ariyachat from Bangkok, December 19, 2015.
- A female senior devotee of Khruba Chao Thueang, November 9, 2015.
- Praphasi (pseudonym), November 4, 2015.
- A male devotee of Khruba Noi, November 1, 2015.
- Dok Kaeomi, a former devotee of Khruba Khao Pi and Khruba Wong, August 22, 2015.
- A female Chinese amulet trader from Beijing, August 14, 2015.
- Inpun and Sukchai, senior devotees of Khruba Khao Pi, July 25–26, 2015.





**Appendix Photo 1** Khruba Siwichai, an Exhibition of Wat Si Soda 2015, Mueang, Chiang Mai, Thailand; Author's Image



**Appendix Photo 2** Khruba Phan at the Robe Changing Ceremony of Khruba Wong 2016, Li, Lamphun; Author's Image



**Appendix Photo 3** Khruba Noi in the 2016 *Thot Kathin* Ceremony at Wat Si Don Mun, Saraphi, Chiang Mai; Author's Image



**Appendix Photo 4** Statues of the Three Greatest *Khruba* of Lan Na: Siwichai, Khao Pi, and Wong at Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan, Mae Suai, Chiang Rai, Thailand; Author's Image



**Appendix Photo 5** *Khruba* Ariyachat in the 2016 *Thot Kathin* Ceremony at Wat Saengkaeo Phothiyan, Mae Suai, Chiang Rai, Thailand; Author's Image